



Herald photo by Ian Martens

Chris Schamber, showing his accessible bathroom in his home, says there is a problem with a lack of barrier-free affordable housing throughout the province.

Accessible housing lacking

Lack of rental accommodation a province-wide problem

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Finding rental accommodation in Lethbridge isn't easy and it's doubly difficult to find affordable accessible housing. And Lethbridge is not alone. Brad Anderson, a quadriplegic, wants an accessible unit with a wheel-in shower but his attempts to find something suitable have been stymied at every turn.

"I've been looking for about three months in the city now and I'm not finding anything," he said.

Anderson lived in Lethbridge up until four years ago. He owned a home then, but after he finished university, he couldn't find a job and had student loans to pay.

"I ended up selling my house to pay off my student loans and I ended up in my sister's garage," he said.

His sister lives in the country near Pine Lake and they converted part of the garage into living quarters. He said he's been snowed in during the past three winters and he's desperate to move to a city where he can get out when he wants.

One of the options he's considering is returning to the University of Lethbridge for further studies. If he goes ahead with that plan and provided he applies for housing early enough, he should be able to live in one of the university's 14 accessible residence units.

Anderson also checked with the

Lethbridge Housing Authority, the body that manages several affordable housing projects including Halmrast Manor, Haig Tower and Hardie Manor. Out of 407 suites 16 are handicapped accessible.

Lethbridge Housing manages a handful of other properties including the Castle Apartments and individual duplexes and four-plexes and it has built additional affordable housing units with grants from the provincial government with plans to add more. While Lethbridge Housing may not be able to provide an accessible unit immediately, chief administrator Chris Schonbrun said turnover of units does occur and he encouraged Anderson to apply, even though it could take time for a suitable unit to become available.

The housing association also operates a rent subsidy program and works with about 20 landlords and supports about 650 households. However, last year's provincial budget included a reduction in the overall rent supplement budget. Some housing management bodies put caps in place as a result. Numbers for the 2014-15 budget haven't yet been finalized.

Anderson has also been looking for an accessible unit elsewhere in Alberta.

Chris Schamber, barrier-free consultant, said part of the problem is a lack of barrier-free affordable housing.

"When the government is giving out affordable housing money — I'm not up on the policies to date but there once was a time where 10 per cent of it had to go to accessible affordable housing which is good — the government also has to remember that accessible housing needs to be a little bit bigger than just affordable housing," he said.

Making units barrier free from the beginning means no retrofitting down the road to make a unit suitable for one person's needs only.

"So they need to put a little bit more funds into the accessible affordable housing than just giving it the same amount for affordable housing, so they can adapt an accessible suite to be universal depending on whoever lives there," he said.

Schamber said he's familiar with Anderson's situation and he recognizes the situation is similar in other Alberta cities.

"It's a problem throughout the province. There's not enough accessible housing," he said. "I think the government needs to put some funds into accessible housing so people can have a chance to move where they want to participate in whatever community they want to live in inclusion."

Section 3.8 of the Alberta Building Code indicates a residential project funded wholly or partly by the province is required to have a certain number of "adaptable dwelling units which could be made to meet barrier-free design principles." In a project of 10 to 25 units, two or more are required to be adaptable dwelling units. In a 26- to 50-unit development the minimum is five and for a 51- to 100-unit building the minimum is 10. For projects of 101 to 200 units 15 or more adaptable dwelling units are required and for developments of more than 200 units 20 or more must be adaptable.

"The government also needs to set different regulations for hotels so people with high level mobility impairments can go wherever they want," Schamber said.

The province committed to support the development of 11,000 affordable housing units by 2012 following the recommendations of the Alberta Affordable Housing Task Force. Several projects in Lethbridge have benefited from the Housing Capital Initiatives grant program.